

Metropolitan Sewers.

Letter of Mr Baker, one of the Coroners for Middlesex.

12 CHESTER TERRACE, REGENT'S PARK,
19th February, 1849.

SIR,—I have felt it to be my duty to draw the attention of Her Majesty's Justices and Commissioners of Sewers to several cases of death which have occurred within my district of the county of Middlesex, in the parishes of Shoreditch, Hackney, Bethnal Green, Bromley, etc., and have pointed out the several localities where there have been great complaints of the deficiency of the sewage; and I am now again directed by a jury to call their special attention, through you, to the sewer at Silkmill row, Hackney wick.

I have this day held an inquest on a child, who has died from fever arising from the foetid and noxious effluvia inhaled from a large mass of stagnated mud lying there, uncovered by water, and, according to the medical testimony, there have been no fewer than six deaths from the same cause within the last five weeks.

I wrote to the late Commissioners respecting this sewer. Some loads of mud were then removed, but the place is now in the same disgraceful state, and unless some attention is immediately paid to the abatement of the evil and nuisance complained of, there must necessarily be a continuance of the mortality, the mother of the deceased being very ill from the same cause, and another child being seized with fever this day.

I consider myself placed in a situation of grave responsibility in reference to these and other cases of neglected sewage and drainage to which I have alluded; and feel it to be absolutely necessary to draw the attention of the Commissioners to the state of the Criminal Law on this subject as it stands affected by the recent Acts which have been passed by the legislature for the preservation of the public health, the prevention of the loss of life, the promoting of a sufficient drainage, and the removal of nuisances.

The law is shortly, but very clearly laid down by the late Commissioners appointed to inquire into the state of the Criminal Law, and is as follows:—

“ Article 1. The law takes no cognizance of homicide, unless death result from bodily injury occasioned by some act or *unlawful omission*, as contra-distinguished from death occasioned by an influence on the mind, or by any disease arising from such influence.

“ Article 2. The terms ‘unlawful omission,’ comprehend every case *where any one being under legal obligation to supply food, clothing, or other aid, or make any other provision for the sustentation of life, or prevention of injury to life, is guilty of any breach of such duty.*

“ Article 3. It is homicide, although the effects of the injury be merely to accelerate the death of any one labouring under some previous injury or infirmity, or although if timely remedies or skilful treatment had been applied death might have been prevented.”

I cannot but feel that a great responsibility rests upon the Commissioners of Sewers under this state of the law.

The General Board of Health have, in several public notifications and orders to the several Boards, laid down such stringent rules and regulations in relation to the public health, as would, if they could be fully acted upon and carried out, accomplish every object which the law requires; but it appears to me that without the concurrence and cordial co-operation of the Commissioners of Sewers, almost in every parish of my district, it is impossible that this can be the case; and unless a simultaneous and vigorous effort be made in co-operation with the measures of the General Board, so as to produce a perfect result, the most fearful consequences may be apprehended, not only as to the district in question, but to the whole metropolis, from the spread of fever, cholera, and other diseases.

Whatever deficiencies may be attributed to the Commissioners acting under the old Commissions, whose duties were circumscribed by the peculiar law under which they acted, no such plea can be available to the Commissioners acting under the Act of last session, which not only gives them complete power and control over all the private drains, as well as public sewers, but have furnished them also with the most ample means of raising funds to accomplish public works to any extent, which a just regard to the public health and security to human life may render necessary; and the public have a right to look for, and therefore does expect such a co-operation on their part, as will tend to perfect all the measures, which are deemed requisite by the General Board for the public health and safety.

The General Board, in order to assist me in carrying out their sanitary measures, have hitherto sent and promised to continue to send me all their general notifications and orders, and I have been enabled thereby to promote, in no inconsiderable degree, throughout my district, the enforcement of these sanitary measures, by making the same known and generally understood through the verdict of juries.

Now, what I have to urge on the Commissioners is, that they adopt the same course in regard to any orders they may issue of a peremptory character, for public or private works, that it may be known to me whether such duties are neglected or not.

With these documents in my possession I might do much to enforce the Commissioners' orders, if any such are issued, and thereby promote the general health of the neighbourhood, but at present I know of no such orders, and see nothing whatever done to remedy the evils complained of.

I am, &c.,

W. BAKER, one of the Coroners for Middlesex.

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